

Actaea racemosa

[Synonyms : *Actaea cimicifuga*, *Actaea spicata*, *Cimicifuga racemosa*, *Macrotys actaeoides*, *Thalictrodes racemosa*]

BLACK COHOSH is a perennial. Native to eastern North America it has small fetid-smelling, creamy white flowers with many stamens.

It is also known as Battle weed, Big snakeroot, Black baneberry, Black bugbane, Black snakeroot, Blueberry, Blue ginseng, Bugbane, Bugwort, Cimicifuga, Cohosh, Cohosh bugbane, Columbine-leaved leontice, Cordate-rattletop, Deer weed, Fairy-candles, False cohosh, Feather wands, Heart-leaved rattletop, *Läkesilverax* (Swedish), *Lännekimikki* (Finnish), Meadow rue-leontice, Papoose root, Rattleroot, Rattlesnake root, Rattlesnake weed, Rattle top, Rattleweed, Richweed, *Silberkerze* (German), *Spjutsilverax* (Swedish), Squawroot, Squaw weed, Star lance, Summer rockets, Swan's neck, Tall bugbane, Tall snakeroot, *Traubensilberkerze* (German), Virginia snakeroot, *Wanzenkraut* (German), and Yellow ginseng.

The flowerbuds open progressively upwards on the long flowerspike.

The roots (that are used fresh or dried) are dug up in Autumn when the leaves have died and the fruit have appeared. They yield a drug known as Cimicifugin.

Warning – black cohosh should only be used by qualified practitioners. Large doses can aggravate the central nervous system. They can also cause dizziness, intense headaches, nausea, slowed pulse rate, excessive perspiration, visual disturbance, vomiting and muscle contractions. Particularly because of the latter, this plant must not be taken internally during pregnancy.

Racemosa means 'with stalked flowers up the stem'.

Black cohosh was originally used by North American Indian tribes (particularly the Iroquois) for easing childbirth, and the Cherokee tribe prescribed it for some period problems. The latter also used it to treat tuberculosis, and coughs and colds generally, as well as choosing it for fluid retention and as a laxative. The Cherokee and Iroquois tribes both included black cohosh in remedies for rheumatism, and according to records the Cherokee and Delaware gave it to members of their respective tribes as a tonic. The Iroquois prescribed it for some blood problems, and the Penobscot and Micmac Indians both turned to it for easing some kidney disorders.

No doubt much of this medicinal knowledge was passed to the European settlers as apparently they came to use black cohosh to treat gout, some period problems and rheumatism. Records indicate that in some parts of the United States such as Virginia demand for the plant in the last half of the 17th Century was such that its cost per pound spiralled briefly from ten shillings to three pounds. It was first recognized in orthodox Western medicine in 1844 when it was accepted for the treatment of various nervous disorders and for easing rheumatism by a Dr. John King. During this period it was also used to treat snake bites.

Medicinally, the roots have been and continue to be used primarily for treating rheumatoid arthritis, sciatica, bronchitis, whooping cough, St. Vitus's dance and cramps in the womb. It has also been used in the past to treat diarrhoea in children.